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CAN COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM BE A SUSTAINABLE SOLUTION FOR A BETTER COMMUNITY LIFE? DISCUSSING THE CONCEPT, BENEFITS, AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Tourism has long been viewed as a sector capable of improving people's economic welfare. Many experts however, argue that tourism do not always guarantee a higher income for the communities; as on several occasions, while designing tourism development blueprint, “community participation” has received little attention. In this context, one type of tourism, which is directly related to the “community participation”, is the Community-Based Tourism (CBT). CBT is increasingly gaining popularity in the developing nations; as it is theorized that, such tourism approach can strengthen the local economies, empower the local communities, optimize linkages, limit leakages, promote destinations, as well as, can provide a higher quality of visitor experience at tourist destinations. Though CBT projects have benefited many underserved communities in many regions, a good number of CBT efforts have also failed to produce the positive effects and therefore, cannot claim success. Hence, the basic concepts, and various aspects of CBT, and its challenges must be thoroughly understood. This paper focuses on this very aspect. This study is a conceptual research. It takes a qualitative approach to explain the concept of CBT, its benefits, and the challenges that make CBT endeavours less impactful at many places.

The data for this study is collected from both primary and secondary sources. This paper will raise awareness of Community Based Tourism (CBT) that may help the communities, as well as, the tourism planners and policy-makers to successfully implement the CBT projects/initiatives; so that it can be a sustainable solution for a better community life and at the same time, ensure visitor-satisfaction at the tourist destinations.

Keywords: Community, Community Based Tourism, Community Participation, CBT models, Challenges

Introduction

The world's developing nations are now attempting to harness their diverse sectors to help those who are socially and economically marginalized. These countries are therefore, developing policies to deliver immediate advantages to impoverished and backward communities through a variety of initiatives. As, tourism industry can create a large number of job possibilities for both qualified and unskilled workers on a larger scale in the economy, many countries are now developing strategies for tourism development in order to directly disperse its advantages to the unprivileged communities by offering them entrepreneurial and employment opportunities.

Community Based Tourism (CBT) is one such endeavour. It is increasingly gaining popularity as it is theorised that, community driven tourism stimulates the rural economies due to its perceived economic benefits to the locals (Mehmetoglu, 2001); empowers local communities (Shikida et al., 2010) by diversifying their livelihoods (Zapata et al., 2011), backs struggling economies by maximizing linkages, minimizing leakages (Lapeyre, 2010), and also by improving stakeholder cooperation (Lopez-Guzman et al., 2011). CBT is also considered as a worthwhile choice for greater promotion of tourist destinations (Boo and Busser, 2005) and a higher quality of tourist experience with a focus on heightened environmental awareness (Lee, 2011).

The modern day tourists are now increasingly drawn to alternative forms of tourism, particularly those that allow them to immerse in a community's true culture. This paradigm shift has also encouraged many community people, impacted by tourism development at various tourist destinations, to get involved in the tourism sector with the help of government or with other private businesses (Gautam and Walia, 2016).

Though locally driven or Community Based Tourism (CBT) approach has helped the unprivileged community in several regions, where unemployment is high (Marsh, 2022), and thus, has bridged the socio-economic gaps of the local community people; in number of occasions, it is also found that CBT enterprises and initiatives have not been able to see the expected results and hence, they cannot claim success. Because of many such examples of failures in successful implementation of CBT, a section of scholars think that CBT is "only a slogan" and according to them, CBT is a "naive and unrealistic" concept to implement (Blackstock, 2005; Ghaderi and Henderson, 2012).

Hence, there is a need to carry out an in-depth study to explain the concept of CBT as well as its benefits and challenges in detail, so that the concept can be understood and later implemented properly. This paper focuses on it. The insights of this paper will make the government agencies, tourism policymakers and other stakeholders aware of the concept, benefits and challenges of CBT; and it will help them in preparing effective policies and tourism strategies, especially in the local community aspect.

Study Objectives

This research study revolves around a few key objectives. The first objective is to conceptualize the idea of Community Based Tourism (CBT). The second objective is to discuss its benefits.

The third objective is to inspect the intricacies of a few important and successful community based initiatives in tourism, those are tested models to be followed and practiced by the others. The fourth objective is to point out a few common challenges associated with the successful implementation of CBT ventures and those often make CBT less effective and less sustainable. The fifth and final objective is to suggest a few recommendations to overcome the challenges to make sure CBT initiatives more sustainable and impactful from community perspective.

Research Methodology

This study can be categorized as a conceptual research. Designed with a qualitative approach this paper sheds light on various literatures related to the concept of CBT and its benefits. The challenges associated with the successful implementation of CBT ventures are also highlighted.

The authors have minutely reviewed and analyzed the media reports, published articles, government documents, and several working papers for this purpose.

A good number of academicians, NGOs, and CBT practitioners are also consulted with to gather resourceful views. Finally, thematic and content analysis has been applied to scrutinize and infer the data acquired from various reports, reviews, and experts' responses.

Community Based Tourism (Cbt) – A Fillip To Alternative Tourism

Local Community is a critical aspect of any tourist destination and their active involvement and support are considered as important criteria for growth and sustainability of any tourism venture (Poon, 1994).

In this context, The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), and The Earth Council Alliance state that tourism development at any place should not only be considered from an economic or profit standpoint, but it must be developed in a sustainable manner through community participation.

The concept of Community Based Tourism has arisen from these forces. CBT is gaining popularity around the world as an alternative to the mainstream tourism, and it is considered as a viable development paradigm that enhances the socio-economic and cultural benefits of tourism, and at the same time, reduces the negative impacts (Moscardo, 2008; Ruiz-Ballesteros and Hernandez- Ramirez, 2010). The idea behind this approach is to empower the community by increasing their participation in decision-making, as well as ensuring that, the will and desires for participation come from within the community itself.

Cornelissen (2017) points out that the theoretical foundation of CBT has a long history, dating back to the 1970s, when participatory development became a new paradigm in development discourse.

The concept of CBT was first developed in the mid-1990s (Asker, et. al., 2010). Murphy (1985) introduced this concept and later, he himself developed it further (Murphy and Murphy, 2004). CBT is defined in various ways. McIntyre et al. (1993) define "Community" as "any homogeneous place capable of tourism development below the national and regional levels of planning." Gilchrist (2003) defines "community development" as "building active and sustainable communities based on social justice and mutual respect".

According to Mowforth and Munt (2009), CBT is a kind of tourism that aims to increase people's participation and ownership in tourism at destinations.

Li (2004) strongly argue for the participation of community people in tourism planning and decision-making in order to handle the tourism impacts.

According to World Wildlife Fund (WWF), CBT is “a form of tourism in which, the local community people has substantial control over and involvement in its development and management, and a major proportion of the benefits remain within the community” (Goodwin and Santilli, 2009). In this regard, community empowerment is considered as an important aspect of CBT approach (Dangi and Jamal, 2016).

Community empowerment assists communities in gaining control of the environment and achieving their objectives so that they can help others to improve their living standard (Widayanti (2012). CBT's primary tenet is community development, which makes use of community potential and resources managed and controlled by the community itself.

It directs the community people to take an active role in tourism development and at the same time, strengthens their ability to solve problems without relying on the help from the outsiders (Dangi and Jamal, 2016).

Benefits of Community Based Tourism (CBT) Approach

Wearing and Larsen (1996) consider CBT as an important element of sustainable development spectrum. According to Trejos and Chiang (2009), community people can receive large amount of profits through community driven tourism. CBT has the ability to help the unprivileged community in those regions, where unemployment is high (Marsh, 2022). It is a viable development paradigm that can maximize the socio-economic and cultural benefits of tourism, while at the same time, can minimize the negative impacts of tourism at destinations (Ruiz-Ballesteros and HernAndez- Ramirez, 2010). CBT can also act as a development tool for ethnic, indigenous and rural communities. Through it, locals get opportunity to demonstrate and share their culture in front of the world; on the other hand, they can also learn about others cultures. The host communities receive a number of benefits from this approach. Poverty alleviation and new job creation are only two of them.

Furthermore, by transferring decision-making to communities, locally-driven tourism decentralizes the tourism industry contributing to the development of regional tourism products, and leading to the strengthening of empowering the local communities (The Association of Caribbean States, 2015).

Community development and their wholehearted participation in tourism planning and development are at the core of CBT (Lopez-Guzman et al., 2011). It has been identified as one of the recognized strategies for community development endeavors (Baniya et al., 2018). According to Brohman (1996), the goal of CBT is to strengthen institutions that promote local participation and general public's socio-economic and cultural well-being.

CBT strives for a harmonic and balanced approach to the development, focusing on (1) compatibility of various forms of development with other aspects of the local economy, (2) quality of cultural as well as environmental development, and (3) community's diverse needs, interests, and potentials. If properly run and managed, CBT can promote the conservation, as well as, can increase local benefits through increasing participation in tourism (Sebele, 2010).

According to Jain and Triranganon (2003), CBT opens up new avenues for research and promises of tourism growth in conjunction with other options such as Pro-Poor Tourism (PPT), Community Benefit Tourist Initiatives (CBTIs), and Volunteer Tourism. The key benefits of CBT include both direct and indirect economic impact on community families, increased environmental and socio-economic development of an area, and sustainable lifestyle diversity (Manyara and Jones, 2007).

Successful Community Based Tourism Examples In Practice

The importance of CBT has got a global visibility when the tourism thinkers and world bodies decided to celebrate the Year 2014 as “International Year for Tourism and Community Development”. Many western countries and lesser developed countries (LDC) have adopted this bottom-up approach as an innovative concept for poverty alleviation and sustainable development. Here the authors mention a few successful community based models in tourism, those have immense contribution in the betterment of community life at various tourist destinations.

[1] The Manda Community Trust (MCT) in the Northern Mozambique, East Africa: It is a successful community model that helps the community people of the Northern Mozambique in realizing their full potential. This trust has actively engaged 20,000 native Nyanja people in the sustainable development process. MCT acts as a leader in the fight against deforestation and it collaborates with local community on various projects, they choose for themselves.

[2] Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) in Nepal: This community based project was established to sensitize Nepalese community about their responsibilities towards protected area. The focus was on increasing local ability to accomplish the sustainable development goals in the ACA region. Bajracharya et al. (2005) examined the effect of this project and found that due to this project the community control over the local resources and community awareness on conservation both have increased. By strengthening the local Conservation Area Management Committees (CAMC), this project has improved the community life in the ACA region.

[3] The Ananda Project in Naggar in Himachal Pradesh, India: Naggar, located in Kullu Valley, in Himachal Pradesh became known to the world when an NGO, 'Ananda,' started working for community development through volunteer tourism. Gautam and Walia (2016) conducted a study here, to investigate if the residents were really getting the benefits of community-based tourism in their communities; and found that community is truly gaining the socio-economic benefits of community based tourism.

[4] The Chalalán Ecolodge in Bolivia, South America: Chalalán is an eco-lodge run by the indigenous people of San José de Uchupiamonas, who are specialised in ethnic ecotourism. It is a collaborative venture of the rainforest community of San José de Uchupiamonas and the Conservation International (CI) in Bolivia. This eco-lodge generates jobs through nature-based tourism. This project started with an aim to create a viable eco-lodge that will be run and managed by the local people. For this purpose, CI provided various skill-development training to the community people. The community took full control of the lodge from CI in February 2001. Now, seventy four families receive regular direct economic advantages from this project.

Challenges of Community Based Tourism

In the previous sections, the authors have tried to clearly outline the concept of CBT and its benefits. In this section, the common challenges associated with the successful implementation of CBT have been mentioned. For this purpose, the authors minutely read a good number of scholarly articles (Blackstock, 2005; Mohanty et al., 2019; Rout and Gupta, 2017; Tamir, 2015; Wang et al. 2013; Weaver 2010; Yotsumoto et al., 2016; etc.). Apart from that, the authors also consulted with a few academicians, NGO experts, and CBT practitioners to understand the common challenges of successful implementation and promotion of Community Based Tourism (CBT) at various places.

Dr. Mir Abdul Sofique – Professor of University of Burdwan, India; Mr. Samik Ray - Regional Level Guide, Eastern region, India; Miss Sunita Dhairyam - Founder of Mariamma Charitable Trust, Karnataka, India; Lt. Col. Shakti Ranjan Banerjee - former state Director of WWF-India (WB) and presently, Honorary Director of Wildlife Protection Society of India;

Mr. Anil Mistry - conservationist, and co-founder of Tora Eco-Resort and Life Experience Centre in the Indian Sunderbans; Ananya Bhattacharya - a social entrepreneur and Co-Founder of banglanatak dot com; are the few prominent experts with whom the researchers discussed on this topic. From all these readings, discussions with the experts, and face-to-face interviews with the CBT practitioners, finally, a total of twenty one challenges are identified, those often make CBT ventures less effective and unsustainable at many places.

These challenges are listed below:

1. Lack of awareness and understanding of the benefits of CBT in community level;
2. lack of interest and sometime negative attitude towards tourism initiatives;
3. Lack of active participation in tourism initiatives from community level;
4. Lack of education and training for skill development in community level;
5. Poor infrastructures;
6. Language barriers;
7. Lack of marketing and promotion;
8. Lack of government support and funding;
9. Lack of security and pro-poor management;
10. Conflicts between the different public administrations;
11. Conflict in leadership;
12. Factions;
13. Corruptions;

14. Lack of monitoring regarding tourist satisfaction and quality of service delivered;
15. Lack of capacity creating challenges on the quality of services delivered;
16. Limited scope for income generation;
17. Over-dependency on the external donor funding;
18. Inequality in income distribution;
19. Lack of planning;
20. Lack of reinvestment priorities;
21. Gap between the academic definitions and the way it is used by the practitioners.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To overcome the above mentioned challenges of Community Based Tourism (CBT), as well as, to make CBT more sustainable and impactful from the community perspective, the following suggestions should be considered in order to achieve the desired objectives.

1. CBT projects are difficult to implement successfully without active participation of the host community. Hence, Government agencies, tourism planners, and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) should lead the charge in increasing community awareness on tourism benefits in general, and CBT in particular.
2. Local control and community ownership are also crucial for the long-term success of any CBT project.
3. Enough training should be given to the CBT participants so that they can deliver high-quality services and thus, can satisfy tourists' demand.
4. Proper education should be offered to remove ignorance from the community and to make everyone more aware of their identity and values.
5. The existing tourism products and the tourism potentials of any place should be meticulously recorded and showcased to the visitors. It will instil hope and confidence in the host community people about their worth as human beings.

6. Methods for developing formal financial procedures and a financial information system must be designed. Otherwise, corruption might hinder the progress of CBT.
7. Government bodies, Non-governmental Organizations, tourism stakeholders – all should play responsibly and support CBT initiatives. The Government should prioritise community driven tourism as a key component of their tourism development strategy at tourism destinations and should effectively implement it.
8. The long-term viability of CBT programmes is dependent in part on local economic diversification. To boost economic engagement in tourism, local populations should be properly trained and guided in craft-making, cultural event organisation, and souvenir sales.
9. Capacity building training is the most important input that CBT members should receive in order to address the existing capacity problem among CBT projects.

Conclusion

Tourism is frequently blamed for allowing the non-residents to dominate the business, while the locals are compelled to work for low pay due to the lack of necessary skills. In this context, community-based tourism (CBT) has been proposed as a viable solution to this problem. In this type of tourism, the host communities play a key role in determining the form and process of tourism development at tourist destinations. CBT has recently emerged as a significant trend for long-term development in the developing nations as it is often considered as a responsible way that can lessen tourism's risks and hazards, while fostering a positive contact between the hosts and the guests (tourists) that subsequently leads to a peaceful environment.

In the long-run, community-driven tourism can improve destination's image, and assist with much-needed strategic destination marketing, it can also increase visitors' footfall at tourist destinations. Moreover, such tourism approach not only empowers the host community, but also ensures long-term viability of any destination, particularly in the rural areas. It has been found that, community-based tourism (CBT), when correctly executed, is the pinnacle of good tourism; as one hand, it aids local communities in improving their lives and sharing their stories; and on the other hand, it provides the travellers with unique experiences at the tourist spots. Hence, Community Based Tourism (CBT) should be rightly implemented in order to provide the real benefits of tourism to the local communities.

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